

Politics of health in post-partition Bengal: A historical investigation into practices of care and solidarity, 1947-1966

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Abstract

The proposed article tries to look at the squatters' movement in the post-partition Bengal, especially their struggles for health and hygiene, as a particular expression of the 'politics of life'. Taking a cue from Ranabir Samaddar's *A Pandemic and the Politics of Life* one can argue that the 'politics of life' comes into existence when the banal, everyday reproduction of life 'faces a sudden crisis'. Contentious politics of life must therefore take the struggle for the reproduction of life to the streets. It is from this premise, this article seeks to critically analyze the collective actions of the squatters in building their own health care infrastructure such as maternity wards and dispensaries in the colonies. Reading them contextually and along with other collective actions like school and gymnasium/club building in the colonies, this paper tries to suggest that a concern for ensuring reproduction of life predominated in those actions. On the face of a violent uprooting from their earlier lives, the collective actions of the refugees from East Bengal spent much collective energy on health care and hygiene activities in the colonies. Speculations on future, one can argue, constituted an integral part of these practices. These activities related to health care in the colonies/camps, as this paper would show, brought together different actors, not all of them being from the colonies, and created a variety of solidarity networks. Everyday life at the colonies required the squatters, as one of the refugee memoirs suggests, working with the local councillors, the party leaders and many others. It seems hard to fit these collective actions of the squatters into a neat binary of charity/self-reliance, as the much of the received historiography would like us to believe. This reproduces the statist narrative presented in B. S. Guha's Anthropological Survey of India study which distinguished the 'lazy', 'charity-dependent' camp-dwellers from the 'enterprising', 'self-reliant' colonists. The collective actions related to health care and hygiene of the East Bengali refugees were too complex to be reduced into such a simple binary.

Debates on the role of 'charity' or 'relief' in organized *political* practices featured significantly in the post-partition Left politics too. Manikuntala Sen's memoir tells us that the relief works in *basti* areas by the women comrades were ridiculed as Ramkrishna Mission work and a divergence from the path to revolution. Therefore, it would be interesting to reconsider how far these relief works for the displaced and dispossessed were central to the left politics of the time. One must understand that these practices did not originate in a vacuum, but they need to be situated within a long historical tradition of solidarity actions. An investigation into the 'relief' or solidarity actions of the Left, it is

hoped, will provide useful insights into the peculiar construction of the 'political' in the Left discourses of contemporary Bengal and its relation to the question of life.

If the crises of health among the refugee population often made them subjects of risk in the eyes of the governmental state, their animalistic 'bare life' in the camps and various railway stations provoked sharp criticisms of the postcolonial state for being apathetic or 'careless'. How do we then make sense of the discourses of care (of life) that were reflected in the collective actions of the squatters/camp-dwellers and the Left solidarity networks in post-partition Bengal? How is 'life' conceptualized through these practices? To what extent 'care' was considered to be central to the political life? Theorists of care such as Hamington, Sue Mann and others 'have sought to recover and emphasize body's centrality to political thought and life'. Following that tradition, it would be interesting to see how the politics of health in post-partition Bengal brought the corporeal body into visibility, which the politics of representation could never produce. Finally, if the refugees from East Bengal could become citizens through their participation in the political life of Bengal, the peculiar form of citizenship this politics of life could bring forth is something which this paper would like to probe along the grains of the archives.

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